Happy Easter!

It’s Easter! Or is it? That depends on whose date you follow. And that’s got Barry Oliver thinking in his Easter message this year; and Eliezer Gonzalez explaining. Whatever the date, this is a long weekend for many of us, and over the holiday RECORD has an assignment for you: check out the brand new South Pacific Division website at <spd.adventist.org> and let us know what you think of it on our RECORD poll.

No matter the date for Easter, what we can all agree on is this simple proposition: because God loved us so much, He gave us His only Son, so we can experience eternal life. Now that’s a love and a promise worth celebrating every single day of the year!

Worm or man?

"I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people," said Jesus (Psalm 22:6, KJV). What did He mean by this? Is this a metaphor for death? A poetic reference to the grave?

Sunday-Worship and the date of Easter

Read RECORD

Get your hands on a copy of the special Easter edition of RECORD—in churches this Sabbath.
Eliezer Gonzalez tells the story about why we celebrate Easter when we do. It's a story of what happens when churches "major on minors" instead of focusing on the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Remembering Jesus

Maybe you've heard the story before of the two disciples walking ahead of Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-33). The story seems simple enough, but, as Pastor David Edgren explains, there is a far greater story being told.

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In this week's episode of Record InFocus, a Scottish church shares its worship space with Muslims. And how does your diet stack up against the alternatives? Click for your weekly dose of news, politics, health and interviews, all from a Christian perspective.

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For more than two decades a passage in the Bible has troubled me. Jesus called Himself “the Son of Man” and yet, in the messianic Psalm written many hundreds of years before His death, He denies His humanity and states: “but I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people” (Psalm 22:6, KJV). What did He mean by this? Is this a metaphor for death? A poetic reference to the grave? I don’t think so. Rather, in my study of the text, I’ve come to believe it means much more.

Was Christ calling Himself an earthworm in Psalm 22? I’ve thought about the nature of a common earthworm and it just doesn’t seem to fit. Yes, earthworms aerate the soil and provide moisture channels. They consume soil and their droppings fertilise the subterranean world they live in. Yet the earthworm is blind and hates the light. As a matter of fact it perishes quickly if it’s exposed to direct sunlight. This just doesn’t seem an apt metaphor for the “Light of the World”.

If not the earthworm, then what, and does it matter?

It does matter. It matters as I don’t believe it was chance that Jesus quoted Psalm 22:1 in His last moments on the cross when He cried out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” In His loud cry of despair He points us to Psalm 22. Therefore, I believe every word of Psalm 22 gives us vital insights into Christ’s mission.

In my study of Psalm 22:6, I’ve learned that in the Bible the Hebrew word for worm is usually rimmah, which means maggot, but the Hebrew word used in Psalm 22 is tola`ath, which means “crimson or scarlet worm”. The crimson worm was very special. It was
gathered and crushed for its scarlet colour. The dye produced was unique and long lasting and was used to dye clothes, including the garments of the priests.

Why does any of this matter? Because the crimson worm, it turns out, is the perfect metaphor for a Saviour who died on a tree, gave life through His death, was raised on the third day and instructed His followers to remember Him through communion. How perfect? Read on . . .

When it's time for the female crimson worm to deliver her larvae, she attaches herself to wood and forms over her body a hard protective crimson shell. She's so strongly and permanently attached to the wood and her covering that her coating cannot be prised away without tearing her body completely apart and killing her.

The worm then lays her eggs under her body and protective shell. When the larvae hatch, they stay under the shell. She turns them crimson with her blood. Not only does the mother's body give protection for her babies, they feed on their mother. She gives them life by willingly surrendering hers. After three days, when the young worms grow to a point where they are able to take care of themselves, the mother dies and the next cycle of life for the crimson worm begins. After she dies her colour turns to white wax and she falls from the tree like snow, releasing her young into the freedom of their life cycle.

So what did Jesus mean by saying prophetically, “I am a tola`ath and not a man”? I can only believe that the Man who told all His messages in stories and parables was pointing His people to the nature of the crimson worm, which provides a perfect metaphor for His mission.

Eunice Stenner is a great-grandmother who writes from Forster, NSW.
The story I am going to tell you is about why we celebrate Easter when we do.¹ It’s also a story of what happens when churches “major on minors” instead of focusing on the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Before I begin this story I need to warn you it gets complicated and bumpy at times; there’s excommunications and skulduggery, as well as the rise of Sunday worship, and (perhaps even worse!) there’s also mathematics involved!²

So can we make an agreement, you and I, that you will stay with me to the end of this story? It will be worthwhile. There are some important lessons here about staying true to the teachings of Jesus, and about centring our focus as Christians on the things that are truly important.

**Dennis the Dwarf**

So why do we celebrate Easter on the dates that we do each year? The short answer is that officially in the West, Easter is celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon occurring on or after March 21 (the spring equinox). But all is not as it seems, since the “full moon” is not really the full moon, and the spring equinox is not really on March 21. Rather than bamboozle you with details, let me just say that the system that is used to calculate all this was developed by a sixth-century monk called Dennis the Dwarf.

You probably already knew Dennis from the fact that he developed the AD dating system (Anno Domini—“Year of the Lord”) that divided history into BC and AD years. Perhaps what
you didn’t know is that the only reason why he came up with the idea of AD was as part of trying to work out when Easter should fall!

The upshot of Dennis the Dwarf’s very complicated calculations is that Easter can fall anywhere between March 22 and April 25 on any given year. But that is just in the West! The Orthodox churches of the East use a different system, and they also base their calculation of Easter on the Julian calendar instead of the Gregorian calendar. The Julian calendar was the calendar introduced by Julius Caesar in 45 BC, and it was replaced in the West by the Gregorian calendar introduced in 1582 by Pope Gregory XIII. (It seems that anyone who’s been anyone has played some sort of role in working out the date of Easter!) Under the Julian calendar March 21 is actually April 3, and so Easter in the East can sometimes occur up to five weeks after Easter in the West. That’s how it is today, but how did it get to be such a mess?

The Lord’s Supper and the Jewish Passover

In the New Testament, the ritual that Jesus left the church in order to commemorate His death was the Lord’s Supper (Luke 22:19). This was a meal that centrally spoke of hope, since Jesus indicated that it pointed to the day when He would not drink of the fruit of the vine again until “the kingdom of God comes” (Luke 22:18). So the Lord’s Supper is not only a memorial of the death of Jesus, but by implication, of His resurrection also. The New Testament does not specify how often the Christian communities celebrated the Lord’s Supper, although it’s likely they did it every time they gathered together in worship.

But although Jesus had already instituted a memorial of His death and resurrection, and in spite of Paul’s teaching that “Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Corinthians 5:7), many Christians, especially in the East, continued to observe aspects of the Jewish Passover. For these Christians, this observance came to represent the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Passover fell on the 14th day of the Jewish month of Nisan. But by celebrating Easter on 14 Nisan, the celebration could fall on any day of the week, and not necessarily on a Sunday, the day of resurrection. Church historian Eusebius tells us that this was the custom in Asia Minor, and that Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, traditionally considered to be a disciple of the apostle John, argued for this practice with the bishop of Rome towards the end of the first century. ³
Sunday Strikes Again!

However, the churches in Rome and Alexandria wanted to specifically associate the celebration of Easter with Sunday, the first day of the week. This is especially interesting in the light of the fact that church historian Socrates Scholasticus tells us, much later in the fifth century, that almost all of the Christian churches throughout the world gathered together to worship on the Sabbath every week; it was the Christians of Alexandria and Rome who had stopped doing this long ago in the dim past. It seems no coincidence that the introduction of Sunday worship in early Christianity was championed by the great cities of Rome and Alexandria.

In Rome and Alexandria it was already the custom of many to gather each Sunday, every week, as a celebration of the resurrection, which was of course a tradition for which there is no authority in the Bible. Since the church was trying to agree on what should be the annual celebration of the resurrection of Jesus (Easter), the churches of Rome and Alexandria argued that this annual celebration should be on a Sunday as well. At the end of the second century, Bishop Victor of Rome tried to excommunicate all of the Bishops of Asia for continuing to celebrate Easter on the date of the Jewish Passover, and the excommunications, church confiscations, and all sorts of fun and games continued for centuries.

Small Issues—Big Consequences

It all came to a head in what is called the “Great Schism” on June 16, 1054. On that day the church of the West broke with the church of the East, and the date of Easter was one of the issues that they disagreed over. Pope Leo IX excommunicated his counterpart, the Orthodox Patriarch Michael Cerularius, and the Patriarch excommunicated Pope Leo in return. And that is why today you have the Orthodox churches of the East and the Roman Catholic Church in the West.

All of this could have been avoided if the church had stayed true to the simple teachings of Jesus in the Bible: a simple joyful Sabbath worship as it had been from the beginning, and a simple meal together to remember His death and resurrection until He comes again. Jesus also left us a simple mission to fulfil, and it wasn’t to get out there and excommunicate each other over dates and mathematics. Instead, the mission that He left us was to simply proclaim His good news to the world.

Munch on that as you reach for your next Easter chocolate!
1. This will also necessarily be a very abbreviated story, even when dealing with the Christian era. Some people have also thought that the date of Easter has to do with pre-Christian pagan traditions, but that is beyond the scope of this short article.

2. I'll be skipping a lot of the mathematics!


Eliezer Gonzalez lives on the Gold Coast with his wife Ana and their two children. He is passionate about the growth of the kingdom of Christ. He will also be graduating next month from Macquarie University with a PhD in early Christian history.
There's a powerful story recorded in Luke 24:13–33 of two disciples walking ahead of Jesus on the road to Emmaus.

In verse 16, it's revealed that Jesus, the Divine Storyteller, is doing something intriguingly creative. The men do not recognise Jesus. The Bible explains why. It’s not because Jesus is wearing a mask, or because His post-resurrection body is markedly different. Verse 16 tells us exactly why they don’t recognise Jesus: “God kept them from recognising him.”

The Storyteller is crafting something special. He starts with the end in mind. This verse reveals the goal of the story from the Teller’s perspective. The Author’s goal for the characters in the story is to recognise Jesus. At what point will the Divine Storyteller reveal the third Man to be Jesus?

Interestingly, the characters’ goal is not the same as the Author’s. They want to understand why: Why did Jesus die? Why had they believed a lie? Why had the meaning and purpose been sucked out of their lives? Why?


God’s goal for us in our story is the same as the goal He set for the characters of this story—that we may see Jesus. This story is for those who are walking away. It’s for those who are searching. It’s for those who are asking. God sends you a companion for the journey—so that you might see Jesus.
As listeners participating in the story, we want to know: When will these two men see Jesus as Jesus? What will it take? What needs to happen for people to recognise Jesus for who He really is?

Jesus knew them. He knew their struggles. He knew their thoughts. He knew their story. But Jesus had a plan and it started with them telling their own story. So He asked a question. He could have asked why they were walking away—away from the suffering followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, away from the crucified and resurrected Messiah.

When Jesus sees His followers walking away He chases them, not to belittle them but to join them on their journey and in their conversation, and starting where they are, He asks, “What are you discussing so intently as you walk along?”

One of them, Cleopas, replies, “You must be the only person in Jerusalem who hasn’t heard about all the things that have happened there the last few days.” “What things?” Jesus asks (Luke 24:17–19).

This is such a powerful question, coming from Jesus: “What things?” He's not asking what happened to Him in Jerusalem this weekend. He's asking what happened to them in Jerusalem this weekend. He's not asking what happened on the cross. He's asking what happened inside of them when they witnessed the cross. He's not asking for a factual recounting of the resurrection. He's asking for their view of the resurrection.

Jesus wants to know what His story means to them, where it has been misunderstood and what it's becoming within them. Because seeing Jesus through our eyes and seeing Jesus through God’s eyes are often very different things. And we become that which we behold.

After hearing their story—their story of seeing Him—Jesus has the chance to explain Himself. He opens Scripture, from memory, and pours the Word of God into their hearts and minds.

When Jesus joined them on the path, they didn’t recognise Him. When He joined their conversation, they didn’t recognise Him. When they told their Jesus story, they didn’t recognise Him. Finally Jesus has a chance to explain things. Surely He will reveal Himself. Surely they will recognise Him when the Living Word explains “from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself”.

But they didn’t. It’s so important, at this point, to remember the Author’s goal—Jesus will be seen when He intends to be. He's shaping the story of a people. He's teaching them and us the way He wants to be seen and remembered.
Jesus has journeyed with us, joined our conversation and heard our story. Finally He speaks. He reminds us of the Old Testament teachings. He unpacks all that Moses and the prophets said about the nature of the true Messiah. In their own words, He causes “our hearts to burn within us”.

Now both the two men and we understand who the Messiah was and is. You and I have heard the same sermon from a hundred pulpits. We know who Jesus is. On the road to Emmaus, the characters have reached their goal—they understand what has happened this weekend. But do they recognise Jesus? No, not yet.

The Great Storyteller is still with them. Jesus has yet to reach His goal in their story. What is the Great Author doing? What is God waiting for?

"As they sat down to eat, he took the bread and blessed it. Then he broke it and gave it to them. Suddenly, their eyes were opened, and they recognised him" (Luke 24:30-31).

Four days previously, Jesus did the same thing in a different room.

"On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread and gave thanks to God for it. Then he broke it in pieces and said, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this to remember me.' In the same way, he took the cup of wine after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood. Do this to remember me as often as you drink it.' For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are announcing the Lord’s death until he comes again" (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

Like in the upper room, Jesus enters the house in Emmaus misunderstood and surprises everyone with His words and actions. And in this, He is recognised.

How does the Great Author want us to see Jesus? How does Jesus want to be remembered? In what act did the Divine Storyteller reveal Jesus and tell us to announce “the Lord’s death until he comes again”?

The two men on the road to Emmaus knew Jesus. They had walked with Him before His death. They knew all about Jesus. He had explained the meaning of His death from the Scriptures. But they didn’t recognise Him in their midst.

Until they ate together.

Jesus is to be remembered through the catalyst of communion. Bread and wine. Food and drink. Together. In the upper room, Jesus redefined the Exodus memory event—the
traditional Passover meal—into a commemorative meal of the New Covenant. Then in Emmaus, Jesus redefined every meal into a memory moment—the moment when we recognise Him among us.

Whenever we eat together—at home, at church, at the park, in the office, at restaurants, on the road—we recognise Jesus among us. We must eat with our family. We must eat with our leaders. And we must impress upon all followers of Jesus that to eat together, in remembrance of Him, is more important than we can ever hope to understand.

We must take every opportunity to eat together. And when no opportunity presents itself, we need to create one.

We must eat together.

It's how Jesus wanted to be remembered.

Pastor David Edgren is an author and director of Children's Ministries in the Victorian Conference.